DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 226 148 CE 034 951

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TITLE The Organizing Circumstance: Environmental Determinants in Self-Directed Learning.
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SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Nov 81
NOTE 18p.; Presented at the National Adult Education Conference (DeKalb, IL, November 1981).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Adult Learning; Adults; Adult Students; *Educational Environment; Educational Research; *Environmental Influences; Independent Study; Lifelong Learning; *Nonformal Education

ABSTRACT

A qualitative analysis of adults' descriptions of their learning activities was conducted to determine those factors that organize nonformal learning but which apparently lie beyond the consciousness of the learner. It was hypothesized that the organizing circumstance (organizing factors external to the learner), rather than preplanning by the individual, is the directing force behind much adult nonformal learning. Nine formal and nine nonformal learners were interviewed to study their learning processes. Four major patterns surfaced repeatedly from respondents' accounts of their learning projects and provided a basis for establishing categories related to the circumstances affecting the learner. The four types were single event/anticipated learning, single event/unanticipated learning, series of events/related learning, and series of events/unrelated learning. Findings suggested five areas for additional research: effects of the setting and circumstance on structure of the learning project, effect of circumstances on learners when the educational level is controlled, varying abilities of individuals to extract learning opportunities and resources from personal life spaces, elements in structure of nonformal learning that ought to be incorporated into formal learning to increase its effectiveness, and learners' perceptions of organization of their projects. (YLB)

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THE ORGANIZING CIRCUMSTANCE:
ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINANTS IN SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

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November, 1981

Draft
11/4/81

The Organizing Circumstance:
Environmental Determinants in Self-Directed Learning

Donald W. Mocker - George E. Spear

Introduction

The original research project from which this report emerges was funded by the National Institute of Education in a contract with Kirschner Associates, Inc. and a subcontract with the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC). The authors served as co-investigators and are associated with the Center for Resource Development in Adult Education, UMKC School of Education. They were responsible for the design and implementation of that portion of the original project dealing with non-formal learning. Data pertaining to formal or organized learning were also gathered during the project's tenure.

This paper reports the results of a secondary analysis conducted by the authors after termination of the original project. No funds from that subcontract have been used either for the secondary analysis or for preparation of this paper.

The initial research was designed to investigate a variety of learning activities in which adults with less than a twelfth grade education were engaged. Two goals were established. First, a short range intent to extend the considerable body of knowledge about non-formal learning. Second, a long range goal was to produce new knowledge through the study of non-formal learning that might suggest additional research and also contribute to the improvement of practice in delivering formal, organized learning.

Design

This study investigated the learning processes of adults in both formal and non-formal settings. Formal learning was defined as any organized activity that was planned and directed by an individual or institution and intended to teach something to somebody. Non-formal learning was defined as self-directed

and/or occurring in a setting not designed intentionally to provide an instructional process.

The research was organized around nine program or content areas which included health (of older adults), adult basic education, home and family life, occupation-entry, occupation-maintaining employment, occupation-change, community resources, religion, and leisure.

In each content area nine formal and nine non-formal learners were interviewed using an instrument that was a modification of the original Tough Interview Schedule (1968).

Sampling Procedure

Subjects were selected for the study on the basis of three criteria. First, they had to have less than a twelfth grade education or equivalent (GED). Second, they had to be currently engaged in a learning project or to have completed one not more than sixty days before the interview. Third, they were selected and categorized depending on whether their learning was pursued in a formal or non-formal setting.

Participant selection was not random; but in order to avoid any geographical bias, interviews were conducted with learners in Washington, D.C.; Miami, Florida; Chicago, Illinois; Kansas City, Missouri; and San Diego, California.

Secondary Analysis

For the purpose of this analysis, all data from the original study were recoded, using a different coding system for the data from the first set of interviews with older adults which were dropped. (The interview instrument was revised substantially following that first set of interviews, and the data there did not equate with data collected in the following eight sets of interviews.)

In addition to the change of approach to the quantitative analysis, a qualitative secondary analysis also was conducted, and the researchers believe

the implications drawn from the qualitative data are more significant than are those from the quantitative data. Therefore, this paper pursues the qualitative findings and reports only descriptive quantitative information.

The Problem

Previous research in self-directed learning Tough (1973), Peters and Gordon (1974), Penland (1976) and Hiemstra (1975) have reported or implied the existence of detailed pre-planning of non-formal learning by adults.

Specifically, Tough (1971) identified thirteen steps in planning that the learner "sometimes takes in a self-planned project." These steps include: identifying in detail what is to be learned, resources and methods for learning, time to be devoted to the effort, where to learn, pace of learning, deadline for completion, etc. Tough suggests that these actions may take place so rapidly that the learner is not even aware of them but that they occur nonethe-less.

Such a detailed description of the planning process has persuaded broad acceptance of it. There is the implicit suggestion that self-directed learners usually act on their own behalf in much the same manner that a professional teacher acts in organizing a formal classroom experience. Certainly it implies a controlled linear process which is, to some degree, anticipated and organized by the learner.

In its design, this study was expected to confirm the presence of such a planning process in the non-formal learning experience of the participants, and the interview schedule included a series of direct questions intended to reveal that process. During the first two sub-studies, the researchers were unable to detect any detailed preplanning as had been identified in the previous research. Subsequently, particular attention was given to these questions, but throughout the study, evidence of preplanning did not accrue except in rare instances and then in only vague fashion.

At the same time, it was noted that although non-formal learners apparently did not do detailed preplanning regarding the use of human and non-human resources, sequencing of content, or location of learning, their efforts could not be characterized as random or non-rational. Indeed, there was evidence of definite order, deliberateness and logic in the process.

These observations led inevitably to the question: "How do non-formal learners get started on, and then pursue their learning at all if 1) they are not aware of the specifics to be learned, and 2) if they have no plan for engaging in the learning process?"

This question led to the qualitative analysis of participants' descriptions of their learning activities in an effort to discover those factors that organize non-formal learning but which apparently lie beyond the consciousness of the learner. The findings reported below result from that qualitative analysis which offer an answer to the basic research question. A concept is introduced which the researchers believe more accurately describes the process of pre-planning for this population who have less than a twelfth grade education.

Population

The population for the study was comprised of 158 persons, sixteen years of age or older, of which 80 were engaged in formal learning activities and 78 in non-formal learning projects. Fifty-five females and 25 males were formal learners while 51 females and 27 males made up the non-formal learning group. The mean age of the total population was 23.5 years with a range from 16 to 56 years.

The distribution by highest grade in school completed was:

Grade Level	Frequency
5th	1
7th	3
8th	16
9th	41
10th	38
11th	59
	158

Using grade level completed as the criterion, 138 or 87 percent of the population could be classified as at the GED level.

To determine the relation of grade completed to functioning reading level, an informal reading inventory was administered to each subject with the following distribution:

Readability Level	Frequency*
1st	1
2nd	3
3rd	5
4th	2
5th	1
6th	15
7th/above	130

Using a readabilty measure as the criterion, 130 or 82 percent could be classified as at the GED level. These comparisons suggest that grade level completed was, for this population, a fairly accurate estimate of functioning level.

Rationale

Given the exploratory nature of this inquiry and the absence of a particular theoretical base, the analysis took its direction from a rationale or a series of logical postulations.

First, the researchers observed that in the organizing of formal learning or education, the process is invariably in the hands of a person who has command of the subject matter. This is not at all the case with non-forma learning.

Second, that person has learned the subject matter under, and usually has command of, a formalized and systematic process designed specifically to transfer information from one person to another. It is a formal system for organizing or preplanning learning activities which educators refer to as curriculum development and instruction planning.

Third, curriculum development and instructional planning is itself a social invention; that is to say, it does not occur in nature. Rather, it is an artifical construct and, as such, must be learned since it is not inherent

* Interviewers failed to record the results of one test.

in human beings. Thus its utilization must be learned from others or re-invented on a person-by-person basis. Given their limited exposure to formal education, these respondents might be expected to be less aware of the formal process than populations with longer and more sophisticated educational experience.

Fourth, those who have studied non-formal learning have themselves long and intense educational experience and are practiced in the developmental process. They are, perhaps, likely to perceive learning in terms of those elements that have characterized their own education, as well as professional practice. It might follow that in equating the human control in organizing formal education with the human role in the non-formal learning process, they may be imposing the elements of the artifical model upon a more natural process where, in fact, similarities do not exist.

Finally, if these conditions do indeed pertain, it may then become reasonable to look for organizing factors external to the learner; that is, in the environment or the circumstances surrounding the learner and the learning episode.

Findings

From the above rationale, the researchers derived the concept of the Organizing Circumstance and constructed a tentative hypothesis:

> The Organizing Circumstance, rather than preplanning by the individual, is the directing force behind much, perhaps most, non-formal learning for this population.

It is obvious that the details of the specific circumstances that provide the organization for non-formal learning are as varied as the learners and their respective settings. Each learner's circumstances are unique while, at the same time, associated with many standard demographic variables such as age, sex, ethnic background, economic level, life style, family members, religious preference, etc. However, contrary to the evidence of endless correlational studies, the demographic characteristics appear less significant than the uniqueness of the individual's circumstances.

In seeking generalizations among the myriad of specifics emerging from the analysis, the following observations or perceptions were identified:

1. The impetus or triggering event for a learning episode proceeds from some change in the life circumstances of the learner. The change may be positive or negative, may happen to the individual or to someone who affects his life, or may be an event which simply occurs and is observed within the life space of the individual.

2. The changed circumstance tends to provide a single or very limited alternatives that are most reasonable or attractive for the learner to pursue.

3. The structure, methods, resources and conditions for learning are provided or dictated frequently by the circumstance.

4. Learning sequences progress, not necessarily in linear fashion, but rather, as the circumstances created during one episode become the circumstances for the next necessary and logical step in the process.

Certainly individuals bring to each episode or project their own motivation, aptitude, creativity, energy, tenacity. Also, they exhibit differing abilities to extract from the circumstances whatever alternatives may be present. However, this analysis suggests that the most powerful determinants lie primarily within the circumstance which, in turn, tend to structure or organize the learning process.

From the respondents' accounts of their learning projects there are four major patterns that surface repeatedly, and these have provided a basis for establishing categories related to the circumstances affecting the learner.

Type 1 Single Event/Anticipated Learning

Adults enter, usually voluntarily, a situation where they expect that learning will be required but have little or no idea of what must be learned nor, specifically, how it can be learned. They do, from past experience, expect that the means for learning will be contained within the situation and available to them, i.e., an

Organizing Circumstance is anticipated by the learner.

This is typical with persons accepted for employment for which they have no prior experience nor demonstrated skills. They do know, however, that there will probably be a supervisor to provide some direction, fellow workers to observe or from whom to seek advice, labels on containers, manufacturers' directions attached to pieces of equipment, etc. In this type of Organizing Circumstance the environment contains the resources for learning and governs the process to a large degree.

Example: Marilyn, a high school dropout in her late teens and with no saleable skills, is hired by a fast food restaurant. She knows nothing about the operation but rightly assumes the job environment will contain the means for learning what she needs to know.

The manager shows her a short film and assigns her to watch and assist an experienced worker. Every task and piece of equipment has a simple guide sheet prescribing exact procedures. She watches other workers, reads the guide sheets, asks questions and soon can perform the required tasks at each work station. She remembers from the film that customer relations is most important and she feels best about herself when she relates well to the customers.

Marilyn has contributed the willingness and ability to learn, but almost all other elements in the process have been determined or structured by the environment or circumstances.

Type II. Single Event/Unanticipated Learning

Similar to Type I, this type of Organizing Circumstance most frequently occurs within an organized setting or environment where behavior or tasks performed by people are repeated and frequent. Type II differs in that the adults are not expected nor do they expect to engage in a learning process. Through observation and contact with the repeated

behaviors of those around them, adults accumulate an acute awareness of the knowledge and skills associated with some new competence. If individuals make the decision to learn the new behavior, they have a clear idea of what is required to learn as defined by the particular setting with which they are familiar.

The adults must still learn the knowledge or skills but the circumstances have defined the content and process.

Example: John, in his late 40's and a general laborer all his life, is hired to do simple mechanical work attaching trailer hitches to cars and trucks. His co-workers are welders who do more complicated tasks and who, in turn, are higher paid. John observes repeatedly the welding process as practiced in his shop and finally decides that if he learns to weld he will be able to do the entire job, both mechanical and welding, and will be more valuable to the company.

He begins to ask questions of the welders, becomes familiar with the equipment and its application to various metals, and finally persuades a welder to help him learn how to actually weld. The equipment is available, and he can use it after regular work hours and in slow times for practice.

John's understanding of welding and the direction of his activities are limited by the kinds of welds, the types of equipment and the particular applications made in this shop. He has extracted a learning project in which the potential as well as the structure of the learning have been organized by the limits of the particular circumstances. These circumstantial elements are in contrast with all the other ways in which John might learn to weld.

Type III. Series of Events/Related Learning

Most non-formal learning projects are episodic and unrelated to each other as the adult's needs or interests are satisfied by the single learning experience. However, Type III is characterized by a series or sequence of related episodes which, in retrospect, give the often

erroneous appearance of a linear process directed toward a long-range goal. Instead, the sequence itself is unanticipated, composed of several episodes that are related as one provides the organizing circumstance unexpectedly for the one that follows. Episode 2 follows Episode 1 and Episode 3 follows Episode 2 since the organizing factors are embedded in each prior episode. Thus Episode 3 must follow Episode 2 and cannot be reached following Episode 1.

Example: Donna, 20 years old and working as a waitress, is studying fashion design on her own and hopes one day to open a boutique. Her family was poor when she was in high school; and because she wanted nice clothes, she persuaded a friend's mother to teach her to sew. Using patterns at first, she taught herself to make minor alterations. From there she began to make her own patterns of dresses she saw in shops. Then she started designing clothes for herself and later for friends. Now she reads and observes anything available related to clothing designing and is confident about having a career as a designer in the future.

In retrospect the sequence of various episodes in Donna's life seem to be linear and suggest a plan leading to a long-range goal. However, her description of her episodes indicate that one project contained within it the seeds for the next. One project determined the circumstances that became the base for the one following. The strand directly tying Donna's present learning and ambitions to her first efforts in learning to sew is now evident in retrospect but could not have been foreseen during the developing sequence of episodes.

Type IV. Series of Events/Unrelated Learning

Type IV differs from Type II in that the factors in the Organizing Circumstance are assembled over a longer period of time and from a number of separate ... unrelated settings. During their life span,

individuals assemble random bits of information, observations, or perceptions for no special purpose and whose retention over time is unexplained. When the decision is made to learn a skill or gain competence in a related area, the catalog of related information is the organizing factor.

Here again, those particular circumstances, unique to individuals and their encounters with a variety of environments, provide and account for the organizing of the learning episode.

Example: Allen, a 40 year old craftsman, has decided to take a winter vacation with friends in Colorado and intends to learn to ski. Over the years he has watched the televised skiing in the Winter Olympic Games, has listened with tolerance to friends discuss their skiing vacations and debates over whether or not to take lessons. He has heard snow reports on the radio, observed ski equipment in sporting goods stores, and occasionally read articles on skiing in magazines while waiting in the doctor's office. He particularly remembers an article about Lowell Thomas and John Wayne skiing as older men.

None of this information was collected intentionally but has been a random accumulation retained in memory without particular purpose. Now, invited to join a skiing party, he became aware of a considerable amount of information he has about the sport.

John's particular fund of information has developed over time and is unique to his personal circumstances past and current. In fact, no other person has precisely his fund of information; and these experiences provide a uniqueness to the current circumstances, his perception of those circumstances and the manner in which the circumstances will contribute to the structure of his current learning project.

Discussion

The results of this study have led to an explanation which is rooted in an approach somewhat akin to field theory that was formulated by Kurt Lewin, whose works have impacted heavily the field of adult education, particularly in the areas of group dynamics and motivation. He insisted that the field, or life space, of the individual was the proper unit of study to understand behavior and that the psychological, social and physical elements, interdependently, and as perceived by the person, accounted for action or change or locomotion. Lewin's work is frequently cited as undergirding contemporary theories of motivation that seek to identify those propelling forces that move human beings into action.

Adult educators have been particularly concerned with the motivation of adults to learn or, more accurately, to participate in organized learning activities. The voluntary nature of most adult education programs has compelled adult educators to understand better those factors which attract or repel, facilitate or impede adult participation in organized activities.

Cross (1981) offers a chain-of-response (COR) model which encompasses or takes into account several major theoretical perspectives regarding motivation. The model also demonstrates graphically that the end goal for adult educators is participation of the adult in organized activities.

It is suggested here that the study of non-formal learning could benefit from a different approach. Why adults participate in learning activities is an important question but the evidence of the universality of non-formal learning among all populations suggests that motivation is not a problem. Indeed, it is unclear, given the nature of the origins of non-formal learning, how adult educators might act upon it in any case. Rather, the position of the researchers is that more needs to be understood about the non-formal learning process itself. Study should be directed toward how the structure for learning is constructed

and how and why non-formal learners make their decisions as their learning activities proceed. Current research has identified many elements in the process but with little understanding of how they come to be included.

Lewin, a psychologist, in proposing a field theory approach, was most intent upon discovering the psychological alterations or forces that occured within individuals in interaction with the components of their life space. This concern with psychological events has tended to obscure the significance of the social and physical conditions which establish the boundary zones of life space and limit the individual's perception and choice of action. Lewin envisioned the life space as composed of psychological, social and physical properties. The individual could be assumed to be within a particular region in that life space with other regions directly adjacent and still others more remote. He suggested the importance of the study of these regions (Lewin, 1946).

> The determination of the position of the person within the life space is the first prerequisite for understanding behavior. His social position within or outside of various groups should be known; his position in regard to various activities; in regard to his goal regions; and in regard to physical areas. This is fundamental because the region in which the person is located determines (1) the quality of his immediate surroundings, (2) what kinds of regions are adjacent to the present region-- that is, what possibilities the individual has for his next step-- and (3) what step has meaning of an action toward his goal and what step corresponds to an action away from his goal.

Returning to this research, it began with empirical evidence that in the collective seemed to demonstrate the limits-- even determinant quality of the physical and social life space of the individual. As examples: Mary and Betty are both reading books on growing house plants. Mary, a librarian,

has a wealth of readily available materials while Betty uses a book that was among a few miscellaneous volumes she acquired when her mother died.

Bob and Allen are both learning to repair the brakes on their cars; Bob works as an electrician in a shop that employs three full time automotive mechanics and gets expert advice on his project. Allen, a shipping clerk, has seen his neighbor frequently working on his car in the driveway and seeks advice for his problem.

John has turned the spare bedroom in his home into a study with a comfortable chair, a desk, good lighting and his growing library. He prefers to study there after dinner. Ginny, across town, studies at the kitchen table late at night after the family is in bed because her husband insists that she keep the children quiet and under control while he watches television.

Mary and Betty are using books as their learning resources. Bob and Allen seek out informed advice on solving their problems. John and Ginny study at home. It is obvious, however, that their individual circumstances have limited and, in a sense, organized the learning process. A simple description of their observable behaviors obscures the significance of their circumstances and the meaning of their actions. Further, it must be assumed that their perceptions of the learning process are affected uniquely as their circumstances differ. Certainly, investigators are likely to attach different meanings to observed behaviors which, on the surface, appear to be similar.

This discussion is not intended to promote a behavioristic nor deterministic point of view. It allows for individual autonomy and free will. However, it does contend that choice or free will takes place within an area of circumstances which, at the same time, provides for but also limits alternatives and actions. The circumstances can be said to have an organizing function, and any behavior must be understood within the existing context.

This study suggests a return to Lewin's field theory research with an emphasis on the social-physical environment which seems to provide structure for behavior. Because non-formal learning occurs in a natural environment dominated by chance elements and is in contrast to the artifical and controlled elements which characterize formal learning environments, it seems useful to investigate the possibly differing effects of the natural environments on the learning process. This is opposed to seeking to understand non-formal by imposing what is known about formal learning upon it. Guidelines may be found in Lewin's charge that determining "the position of the person within the life space is the first prerequisite for understanding behavior." (Lewin, 1946).

Future Research Questions

The investigators suggest five areas for additional research.

First, conduct studies for the purpose of investigating the effects of of the setting or circumstances on the structure of the learning project for this population.

Second, it is important to learn if circumstances have greater or lesser effects on learners when one controls for educational level.

Third, insights are needed regarding the varying abilities of individuals to extract or identify learning opportunities and resources from their personal life spaces. An experimental approach might be utilized in such studies.

Four, identify if there are elements or conditions in the structure of non-formal learning that might be incorporated into the organizing of formal learning that would increase its effectiveness.

And five, intense case studies of non-formal learning in progress might provide interesting and useful information regarding learners' decisions and how they perceive the organizing of their projects.

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